

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 2-A

WASHINGTON TIMES

14 May 1986

Release of dissident came months later than hoped

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

U.S. officials hoped to win the release of Soviet dissident Anatoly Shcharansky in a spy swap last June, but the exchange was delayed until February, according to a senior administration official.

President Reagan met with Mr. Shcharansky at the White House yesterday day for what presidential aides described as a private conversation.

The senior official, who asked not be named, said State and Justice Department negotiators tried to free Mr. Shcharansky in a Berlin prisoner exchange on June 11, 1985. That swap brought 25 Eastern Europeans imprisoned in East Germany and Poland to the West in exchange for four East Europeans being held in the United States on espionage charges.

The East bloc agents faced prison terms of between 25 years and life, and some had been sentenced only three months before the exchange.

"We were looking to do Shcharansky then, but it didn't go through," said the official. "Shcharansky in February was kind of a positive footnote in the deal."

Intelligence sources said that the June and February exchanges, both of which occurred on the Glienecker Bridge separating East and West Berlin, were preceded by a flurry of counterespionage activities to close down spy networks.

"We were rolling up some of their folks while they were rolling up some of ours as the negotiations were going on," one source said.

The official did not explain why the Soviets refused to release Mr. Shcharansky in June.

But other sources said the Soviets delayed the release for propaganda purposes until after the Geneva summit in November. The Soviets also objected to State Department demands that Mr. Shcharansky's release occur separately from the release of two Germans and a Czech national held in East German jails on espionage charges, the sources said.

Mr. Shcharansky spent nine years in Soviet prisons and labor camps on charges of anti-Soviet activities and espionage. His release Feb. 11 was the culmination of three years of East-West negotiations.

According to the senior official, East German lawyer Wolfgang Vogel, who is closely linked to Communist Party officials in East Germany and the Soviet Union, played a major role in arranging the Shcharansky release.

"Vogel has great credibility with [East German leader Erich] Honecker and apparently the Soviets," the official said. "He came to the U.S. in connection with the exchange negotiations and visited the four who went out in June of 1985. He also came to the U.S. prior to the February trade and visited [Czech spies Karl and Hana Koecher]."

The official described Mr. Vogel as "a shrewd, hard-nosed lawyer who looks after his client's interests." Mr. Vogel was permitted to visit the East bloc spies in the United States, but he warned U.S. officials against visiting the East bloc prisoners.

"We asked to do the same thing over there ... and he said 'they [the prisoners] won't believe you, they'll think it's a KGB trick to get them to talk,' and he was right," said the official. "The people we got out didn't know they were being released until they came to the bridge that day and we went on the bus and said, 'We're Americans, the president has sent us and we're here to get you out.'"

The Koechers, naturalized U.S. citizens, had been awaiting trial in New York on espionage charges. Before the exchange, Mr. Koecher, a former CIA consultant, and his wife were required to renounce their U.S. citizenship.

The official described as "ironic" how Mrs. Koecher prepared for her return: "She's got this beautiful mink coat on and matching pink hat, and here she's going into the workers' paradise."

"We knew that that mink and hat would end up on the back of some Soviet commissar's wife as soon as she crossed the border."